



SECOND WESSEX

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EDITORIAL

The greater part of the material printed in this magazine was solicited. Unsolicited material offered for consideration was either below the standard required for the magazine or not suitable for a publication of this type.

"Second Wessex" is a magazine devoted to Literature, Music, Art, the Film and Theatre, and anything that may conceivably come under the heading of Belles-Lettres.

The Editors feel that they have been able to raise the standard of the magazine in this issue and hope that future Editors will keep this standard in mind. The Editors thank all contributors and hope that the unsuccessful will keep on trying.

THE EDITORS.

S. STEPHEN, DECEMBER 26th, 1954

After the Birth comes the Dying; the angels' song,
Heralds countless sorrows for men of Goodwill.
The humble soldier at grips with his fear,
The hunted priest with his word of fire,
And the holy martyr blessing his martyrdom,
All those who profess and are persecuted
Share in the grief of Crucified Christ,
And in the sorrow of wondering Mary.

Like her, they raise human hands in defence,
Hands grown old with the fostering of Life,
Raised in defence of the new-born Word—
Of the Lord of Hope, the Saving One, God's Way.

Yet human hands heat and torture them
And human voices mock and taunt them,
"Crucify Him" is heard every hour.

But the Dying gave birth to a Livelier Life,
And as Stephen saw hope in the skies,
So now does it steal sunset-silent,
Into a modern heart.

M. E. LUSCOMBE.

SOME ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY FRENCH POETRY

In the French poetic scene today there are no familiar or recognisable landmarks; none of those essentially French, or rather Parisian, institutions called "schools of poetry"; no coherent literary movement and in fact no major poet. The two cardinal points in the literary landscape, Montmartre and Montparnasse, have long been deserted; and few writers of any importance are to be found in the new, would-be centre of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. The background, which once seemed reassuringly stable, has changed. Poems no longer conform to the definition "ouvrage en vers," but have become—to quote Bénac's vague and circular definition—"toute œuvre qui suggère une impression poétique." Within this meaning of the term, a vast amount of poetry is being written, and there is a profusion of poets writing, not only in Paris but also—a new feature—in the provinces.

The situation is confused, and in order to understand it one must go back at least as far as the *Fleurs du Mal* and the *Petits poèmes en prose*. It is since Baudelaire that a poem has ceased to be considered merely as an "ouvrage en vers" and, more important, it is since Baudelaire that poets have turned away from set, conventional themes to explore what he called man's "ciel intérieur." This exploration, or spiritual adventure, was (and still is) a revolt against a materialistic civilisation, and a search for the "nouveau" and the "merveilleux." The influence of Baudelaire and his successors, the "poètes maudits," is dominant among the present generation of writers, and it explains to some extent why the work of Claudel and Valéry—the greatest of the poets in the period between the two wars—has so far had almost no impact on the evolution of French poetry. Yet Claudel himself did not escape the influence of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, and it was his reading of the *Illuminations* that led to his conversion to the Catholic faith; while in the poetry of Valéry the energising force of the *Fleurs du Mal* is clearly seen. But Claudel's development resulted in his becoming, to use Apollinaire's terms, the poet of "l'Ordre" rather than of "l'Aventure," and his work—though equally ambitious—presents a complete contrast to that of the "voyants" and the "poètes maudits." Valéry's work, in so far as it continued and completed that of his master Mallarmé, seems to have ended in a sterile poetic purity, and it is now regarded almost as a period piece. Yet there is evidence that several poets

in France today respect and, though reluctant to admit it, envy the formal perfection of Valéry's writing and the sustained lyricism of Claudel's inspired certitudes. Poems such as *Le Cimetière Marin* and the *Cinq Grandes Odes* cannot long remain in the impasse to which they have been relegated.

In the anarchical mood of 1920, however, young writers rejected the work of both of these poets who, each in his own way, had found some kind of "salvation"—Claudel of the spirit, and Valéry of the intellect—and they turned instead to the Surrealists who declared: "Le salut pour nous n'est nulle part." But they too were seeking salvation and, through a Freudian exploration of the unconscious, hoped to find a "surréalité" in which all the dualities of life would be reconciled. During its turbulent existence, Surrealism grouped many poets who are still writing—Péret, Aragon, Queneau, Soupault, Prévert, and Char; while others—such as Michaux, Supervielle, and Cocteau—though remaining outside the movement, came under its influence. André Breton, the one writer who has remained consistently faithful to the doctrines of the movement he initiated, still has a small following. But the publication in 1948 of his collected "poems" and, in 1952, of *Entretiens*—a volume of radio interviews in which he surveys his thirty years of surrealist activity—suggests that he has nothing new to say. Surrealism, which was meant to be a mode of behaviour and a way of life rather than just a literary movement, has now entered the realm of history where it lies embalmed along with countless other "isms." Although the Surrealists created no coherent artistic forms (that after all was never their intention) their fragmentary writings are records of their search for a "higher reality." Like Claudel and Valéry, they too had protested and revolted, in their own special manner, against our so-called civilisation. By 1939, the force of the movement was spent and its members were scattered; but its influence remained active in many branches of art.

The period of the Occupation produced an unusual co-operation among writers of widely differing creeds (including the former Surrealists) and an impressive creative activity. The works published by the chief clandestine press, the *Editions de Minuit*, and the numerous reviews, seemed ample justification for Gide's prophecy in 1942 of a renaissance of French poetry. The themes were patriotism, love, and freedom, expressed in a language all could understand and in more or less conventional forms. Poetry was "engagée"; it had become, in Aragon's phrase,

"une arme pour l'homme désarmé." It is understandable that, in the exceptional circumstances, poems such as Aragon's *Ballade de celui qui chanta dans les supplices* and Eluard's *Liberté* were received with passionate enthusiasm; and when this poetry eventually reached a wider public at the Liberation in 1945 it was acclaimed even by the critics. But the reaction came surprisingly quickly. In 1946, after Benjamin Péret, from his retreat in Mexico, had denounced all the Resistance writers as "agents de publicité," Reverdy—who had remained in France during the occupation—delivered this more balanced and searching judgment:

"Non, un homme réellement en danger ne réagit pas en écrivain. Que le poète aille à la barricade, c'est bien—c'est mieux que bien—mais il ne peut aller à la barricade et chanter la barricade en même temps. Il faut qu'il la chante avant ou après. Avant, c'est plus prudent, ce qui revient bien à dire que l'homme est d'autant plus engagé que le poète l'est moins."

The statement is certainly not true for all poets, nor for all "barricades"; but looking back from the vantage point of ten years we find that the best poetry was not written by those who, like Aragon and Eluard, did "chanter la barricade," but by the more prudent who sang before and afterwards. The critics have come to see Aragon as a pamphleteer rather than a poet, and he has been politely dismissed as "le Béranger de notre actualité." As for Eluard, it is now generally recognised that his best poems are not his militant verses, nor his final volumes *Poèmes Politiques* and *Une Leçon de Morale*, but the pure love lyrics he wrote as a Surrealist.

Although a more critical approach has led to a complete revaluation of the literature of the war period, many poems published at that time have endured; in particular those by writers who were already well known and who were not directly involved in active resistance work—Saint-John Perse, Jouve, Supervielle, Michaux, Patrice de la Tour du Pin. In addition, many new writers of real promise were revealed—Cadou, Guillevic, Frénaud, Cayrol and Emmanuel. The mere enumeration of these names (and many more could be added) is some indication of the richness of French poetry. The years 1940 to 1945 were exceptionally fertile ones; and the prolific output embraced a great diversity of forms ranging from the apocalyptic rhetoric of Jouve to the dynamic aphorisms of René Char, and including

Michaux's prose-poems and Supervielle's delicately poised lyrics. Literary affinities could be established between some of these writers and a few of them could be fitted into a literary framework; Saint-John Perse and Patrice de la Tour du Pin could be related to Claudel, and ultimately to the *versets* of the Bible; Jouve and his disciple Emmanuel to the line of religious and polemical poetry which goes back through Hugo's *Châtiments* and Chénier's *Iambes* to the *Tragiques* of d'Aubigné; Char to the Surrealists; and Michaux to their one immaculate god, Lautréamont. But the significance of these writers can only be fully appreciated if they are set in the social context of our own time. Each of them answers to Jouve's definition of the poet as "l'oeil de la catastrophe" of the war and of a whole civilisation. In Jouve's own poetry, this catastrophe—seen from both a Catholic and a Freudian point of view—is presented as a conflict between irreconcilable forces of good and evil. For Jouve, man is himself a "conflit insoluble" and is exiled on earth from any source of grace. His work repeats obsessively the same theme and the same images and is like an incessant self-analysis in preparation for the "salut resplendissant" of death. With Saint-John Perse, man's exile is set, in the early poem *Anabase*, against (to quote its translator, T. S. Eliot) "images of migration, of conquest of vast spaces in Asiatic wastes, of destruction and foundation of cities and civilisations"; and, in the later poems *Exil*, *Pluies*, *Neiges*, and *Vents*, against elemental forces and the desolation of our European culture. Michaux is an extreme example of the poet who has been forced by what he calls "les puissances environnantes du monde hostile" into an inner, private world. There he obstinately remains, alternately cultivating and "exorcizing", as he says, the demons of his unconscious mind. Apart from *Chant dans le Labyrinthe* (written during the Resistance period) in which personal conflicts were transformed into a universal imprecation, he has been content to repeat, with ingenious variations, his nightmarish "voyages en soi." Supervielle appears to be an exception; but his serenity and his whimsical qualities are found mostly in poems about animals and children, where he can forget or "exorcize" (he, too, uses the word) the complexities of mature experience and recapture moments of a lost innocence. Another and more profound aspect of his genius is the stoical expression of his failure to find any remedy for man's solitude in the contemporary world. The vision of Raymond Queneau seems to be the most desolate of all. In his *Petite cosmogonie portative*, a long poem, or rather

a-poème, published in 1950, the history of humanity is given only two lines :—

“Le singe sans effort le singe devint homme
lequel un peu plus tard désagrégea l'atome.”

The rest of the volume is devoted to the machines, beginning with the “machines passives” and ending with the “machines à calculer”. Yet while all these poets express the isolation and the apparent helplessness of man in a world given over to the machines and their inventors, they also affirm his tenacity, courage, and inexhaustible resources in confronting it.

There is, however, one contemporary poet whose work, marked by a more optimistic tone, points to the possibility of a future which he dares to hope will be “reverdisant.” René Char is perhaps the only Surrealist who succeeded in showing that “l'action” could be “la sœur du rêve,” for it was as the leader of a Maquis in Provence that he finally found himself as a poet. During 1940-1944 he completed *Seuls Demeurent*, which contains some of the few poems whose literary value has not diminished since the war. This volume, published in 1945, was followed two years later by *Fureur et Mystère*. At a time when there was no major poet, it was natural enough that these works, which showed not only promise but achievement, should have been overpraised. Camus, for example, declared : “Here at last is the great poet for whom we have been waiting.” Since then Char has published six new volumes, the most important being *A une sérénité crispée* (1952) and *Recherche de la Base et du Sommet*, which appeared this year. But his work is still marked by some of the obscurity of his early, surrealist manner, and by a tendency—shared by many French poets today—to display more ability in making statements about poetry and in speculating about its nature than in expressing himself in authentic poetic terms. Char's statements do, however, reveal a sensitive appreciation of the state of our civilisation and the precarious position of poetry in it. Thus, he writes, “Nous sommes, ce jour, plus près du sinistre que le tocsin lui-même; c'est pourquoi il est grand temps de nous composer une santé du malheur. Dût-elle avoir l'apparence de l'arrogance du miracle.” In contrast to the poetry of Claudel, Jouve and Emmanuel, his poetry is based not on any religious faith but on a new community of feeling born of the Resistance period, and on what he calls a “humanism conscious of its duties.” His recent work suggests that he is attempting to break down the divorce between the poet and his public—but without

making any of the concessions to sentimentality that ensured the commercial success of Prévert's *Paroles*. His affirmation, "J'aime l'homme incertain de ses fins, comme l'est en avril l'arbre fruitier" is lucid and unsentimental. The man he seeks to address is "l'homme qui, d'un pas de somnambule, marche vers les mines meurtrières, conduit par le chant des inventeurs." For this man, in this world, it is doubtful whether the poet's role can be any more ambitious than Char's conception of it as "le veilleur éphémère du monde à la lisière de la peur" or "le magicien de l'insécurité."

If in one sense Char's work is exceptional, in another it is fundamentally representative of contemporary French poetry. When he talks about the "exaltante alliance des contraires" and declares that poetry and truth are synonymous, his words re-echo along the line of poets who, since Baudelaire, have endeavoured to view poetry not simply as a means of expression but as a—or rather *the*—means of knowledge and truth. Char's work is indeed related to the work of those poets—Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé and the Surrealists—and to their belief in poetry as a metaphysical adventure. At the same time, it illustrates the disparity between the multitude of superhuman functions that are still attributed to poetry and the actual substance of the poems produced; between what poetry conceived in the abstract—as a philosophy—should do or be, and what when translated into concrete terms—poems—it in fact does or is. Char's poetry embodies in a striking manner the present dilemma: that of the poet who, while still seeking to follow an essentially Romantic conception of poetry, seeks to acquire some of the Classical virtues.

French poets are acutely conscious of the implications of their predicament in the present age; and it is natural that their main concern should be with the "problem" of poetry and the prospect of its survival. Their speculations, as well as their poems, suggest that while they are striving to preserve the fresh qualities which Baudelaire and his successors introduced into the literary tradition, they are also searching for a different and less ambitious poetic creed. When, however, we have lost any feeling for, or faith in, tradition and when it is no longer possible to draw strength, as Baudelaire still could, from any kind of stable heritage, it may need something more than an *art poétique* to produce a new major poet.

C. A. HACKETT (16.5.55)

FOR D.T., IN SORROW

G. D. CATCHPOLE

When white milk mists lie lightly on the sea,
Breathing gently, beating with the timeless
Tides, muttering contentedly,
Then god-green youths come yearning from the dark
And burning, as young dogs set free
In Spring, might tumble into darknesses.

Burning, their words leap laughing from their lips,
Turn white in incandescent ecstasy,
Strain, like greyhounds in the slips.
Their fiery words deep beat a bleeding arc—
See, where the streaming tears have dripped,
See, see,—St. Pancras drains the weeping sky!

We do not need bright fountains in the streets,
What beats beneath the veneer's queer enough
And quite sufficient for defeat,
These naked boys might scamper into Hell,
Seas white with angry sound might greet
Their aching ears, yet they would send no dove.

They sweep in headlong majesty through air
And æther equally, with sound and fury
Spurning a sea-hung silence. There
Are flames too fierce, they leave white embers stark
And ghastly in an amber glare—
Snow-bound foot-falls, echoing night in day.

But Time's swift hands will glean the ashen path
Though all heaven's hounds are flaring through the night,
Cleans the hearth's empyreal heart.
We travel from the cradle to the cradle—
Her tender touch will render birth
As careless as the virgin snow is white.

But just as barren, it is cruelly bare,
"Just as all love is long so is it blind"
Lilts the prophetess. "Despair!"
The therapy of Time is only able
To nurse the common from the rare,
To nominate a Prompter for the mind.

Beyond black space lie shredded veils of lies,
And men are wedded to their secret lives;
Bound both to myth and history.
What timeless sea can ever surely spell
Out fundamental mysteries?
And what sea-cries may travellers believe?

Youth's leaping tongue explodes a universe,
And yet, exposes to you left behind
All that has cursed him from the first.
In his stern manhood meets a burning death,
And Time's dominion drowns his ghost—
His fiery words but whispers in the wind.

A POET'S LIFE

Rainer Maria Rilke was born in Prague, then capital of Austrian Bohemia, in 1875. He was an only child, son of a minor government official whose marriage with a bigoted Catholic wife was not a happy one. His father wanted him to enter the career in which he himself had failed, and thus the worst thing that could have happened was done to Rilke: the frail, nervous, anxiety-ridden boy was sent to a military boarding school for cadets with a view of making an officer of him, a horrible experience that almost broke him; but when the time came the young Rilke managed to break free, and with financial help provided by an uncle, he studied first philosophy, then law at the universities of Prague and Munich; he never took a degree. At a very early age, he had started writing poetry, and when he was 19, some of it had already been published. There is, of course, nothing unusual in this: most great lyric poetry has been written by young poets, we have only to think of Shelley, Keats, Byron, the young Wordsworth, Rimbaud, Hölderlin, and many others. There can be no doubt that Rilke was a very gifted poet, born with a natural talent for writing verse. But as a young man, he had not found himself, and did not know what to write about. The young Rilke was a rather unprepossessive personality: endowed with an almost morbid sensibility, he was plain, shy, unsure of himself while at the same time feeling himself superior to his surroundings; he was the typical introvert who never participated in the activities of other young people. Soon he drifted into "artistic" circles, for a time lived in an artists' colony at Worpswede in Northern Germany, and there, at 26, he married an attractive young sculptress, by whom he had a daughter.

Married life soon became a problem, for Rilke, without a profession or occupation, could not keep his family; he decided to go to Paris in order to write a study on the great sculptor Rodin. Only a year after his marriage, he found it was imperative for him to live alone in order to find himself and struggle with his destiny as a poet; he could not be a husband and father while all his energy was absorbed in this task. Fortunately, his wife understood, and as the years went by they met at lengthening intervals, without ever living together again; for a number of years she had to provide for herself and the child.

Apart from the material and other difficulties at that period, nobody could have lived in close community with the poet who,

during the greater part of his life, was a prey to deep depressions and agonies of frustration that at times made him almost mentally unbalanced. He suffered from what is medically called an anxiety neurosis, the stages of which are vividly and painfully described in his great prose work, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*.

Life in Paris was hard; Rilke was poor, friendless, lonely, and deliberately plunged deeper and deeper into suffering and despair in an attempt at hardening himself against the danger of becoming a popular, sentimental poet (he had already poured out a great volume of highly ornamental, beautifully mellifluous, somewhat sickly verse). Two trips to Russia, undertaken in 1899 and the following year (before he went to Paris), had been of great and decisive importance to him; they immeasurably widened his experience and horizon, and eventually yielded the *Book of Hours*, his first poetical success: a long sequence of lyrics of a pilgrim, a God-seeker who finds Him in loneliness, prayer, poverty and death. This was very intense poetry and unmistakably the poet's own, but still bordering on the sentimental, and over-elaborate in form.

In Paris, Rilke lived for some time in close proximity to Rodin, and here at last came the great break-away from his previous path. Conscious that his danger lay in an excess of feeling, Rilke now suppressed all personal emotion and concentrated on what he called "the things." Rodin was strong, virile, a naive and unconscious creator; from him the delicate, almost feminine poet learned patience, observation, concentration. For hours and days on end, he would watch a plant, an animal, a statue, a building, a landscape or townscape, and then condense his intense experience of these "things" into a poem. These poems, mostly short, and characteristically called "New Poems," were published in two volumes in 1907 and 1908. They mark an epoch not only for Rilke, but for German poetry as well. Rilke had by now created and perfected his own very personal language to express, with a hitherto unheard of precision and suppleness, the delicate intensity of his sensations, a language that, in a masterly way, makes use of a great number of poetic devices such as rhyme, assonance, rhythm, alliteration, vowel sounds, enjambment, repetition, foreign words, new words, etc. None of these devices was new, but Rilke knew how to marshal them with an economy, a density, a surety of touch and taste such as had never been attempted before, and as only a great master could do.

By now, the German publisher Kippenberg, owner of the famous Insel-Verlag, had taken care of Rilke's material problems and seen to it that he could work free of financial cares. The "New Poems" had left their author somewhat exhausted; something new was stirring within him, he felt that the "things" were somehow not enough, that more was required of him, a synthesis of experience, a message of life. A new struggle was on, more bitter perhaps and certainly longer than the previous one, which had ended in victory over the intensity of his personal emotions. But had this victory been real and decisive? Could the poet go on glorifying the "things" at the expense of all human values? Rilke felt he had to re-conquer the lost realm of feeling on a higher plane. He was by now a widely acclaimed and esteemed poet with a growing circle of friends and admirers, mostly women. For his work, he needed stimulating, beautiful surroundings as well as complete solitude: so it came about that his more wealthy friends, among whom the Austrian aristocracy predominated, vied in offering him their fine country houses and castles while they themselves kept away. During a stay at the lovely old castle of Duino, perched on a high cliff overlooking the Adriatic, Rilke's first *Elegy* was conceived in 1912, followed by others during years of restless, lonely travels all over Europe. Rilke knew that a complete cycle of these great poems was his immediate task and was feeling his way towards their completion. But now the war, intensely felt by the poet, disrupted his whole existence, interrupting progress on his work for a long time. These were the long, barren years when Rilke could not create and waited in vain for inspiration, years of frustration and terrible agony. He wrote some very fine poems during those years, but it was not the poetry he yearned to write, and he did not publish any of it.

In 1919 Rilke escaped to Switzerland, and after some wanderings there was offered by a Swiss admirer a small, tower-like castle as a home, situated in the fertile, wine-growing canton Le Valais. And here, in 1922, it happened at last: in February a storm of inspiration seized the poet, and during a couple of weeks not only were the *Elegies* completed, but a wholly new work was conceived, a cycle of 55 sonnets which he named *Sonnets to Orpheus*. Literary history hardly knows of a similar instance of poetic inspiration: Rilke was literally overwhelmed; he wrote in a storm of creative energy such as he had never experienced before, and when at last it was all over, he did a thing he had

never done before either: the poet, usually so quiet, so reserved, so modest about his achievements, sent telegrams and short letters to his nearest and dearest friends in which he announced, in ecstatic language, that now he had at last achieved what he had in vain striven for through ten long and bitter years.

His chief aim had been to write the *Elegies*, large poems that expressed his deepest thought about life and death, love and joy and suffering. They are poems of lament and praise, the only things he had convinced himself a poet really should live to tell. But why, many will ask, had he not been able to write these poems sooner, and with less effort? The main obstacle, we may assume, must have been to widen and deepen this lonely, almost abnormal man's experience so that it could become a more generally valid experience: the poet, in speaking of himself, must speak of Man, otherwise his poetry cannot have any wide appeal. During the lonely years, Rilke lived with his few emotional experiences, chiselling them down, as it were, until most personal features disappeared and they became large and simple in outline. Another task, equally great and difficult, was to find the symbols and the language to express these experiences: both had to be, as it were, newly created.

It seems natural that Rilke should think less of the other work that was "given" to him during this period of prophetic inspiration, because he had never thought of the *Sonnets* before their creation, while he had laboured with his *Elegies* for so long. But just for that reason perhaps, the *Sonnets* have an other-worldly quality of pure, exalted song, a quality unique in modern poetry.

After 1922, Rilke was a changed man to his friends. A great load of grief and anxiety was taken from him; for the first time he seemed free of anguish, of doubt, of frustration. But not long afterwards his health, which always had been precarious, gave way, and in 1926, at the age of 51, he died.

That, in broad outline, was Rilke's life. In some ways, and looked at superficially, it may be considered a pampered one: material cares were taken from him at a comparatively early age, and he had no responsibilities towards a family or other people; moreover, he could always count on the understanding, the indulgence, the tactful help of admiring friends. It was a singularly

inactive life, and Rilke even shrank from any close contact with his friends; even as a lover, he was aloof and evasive, unable to give himself freely. He could only give himself at a distance, in letters, which he wrote practically every day, so that many thousands of them are known. This number, amazing in itself, is the more astounding if we consider that most of these letters are long, some very long, and all are most carefully worded and beautifully written in the poet's longhand. These letters are as beautiful as they are depressing; Rilke's descriptions are delightful, his verbal felicity in expressing the subtlest shades of emotion or the most precise and delicate observations is amazing; but as soon as he writes about himself, the endless repetition of struggle, self-reproach, frustration and misery becomes agonizing.

Yet if Rilke lived a wholly inactive life and accepted the unusual comforts offered him by his friends, he did so for the sake of his poetry. Poetry was what he lived for, and for its sake, he likewise accepted without flinching loneliness, sadness, struggle and despair. From an early age, he stressed, with an almost monotonous insistence, the importance of growing, of ripening; and he lived accordingly to create the conditions in which such maturing was possible. This meant obliteration of self, passivity, solitude, obscurity, readiness for the call whenever it might come. In many ways, this devoted life was not a human life in the ordinary sense, and Rilke suffered acutely from the abyss that opened between his existence and that of his fellow men; this suffering is poignantly expressed in some of the poems written during the "barren years." In the end, the glory of singular achievement crowned his struggles: the *Elegies* and *Sonnets* are great and significant poetry, expressing the problems, sufferings and triumphs of our time and generation as well as "la condition humaine" in general, and they are likely to endure.

Rilke's life lies before us as an endless struggle for perfection and achievement, characteristic in a way of every artist's life, but unique in that all the features of the artist's life are here heightened to a strange intensity, until they seem to become a symbol of every artist's existence and struggle. No other great artist we know of, with the exception perhaps of Van Gogh, had such obscure and insignificant beginnings, no other artist fought so continuously, so hard for truth and redemption, no other artist was granted fulfillment in so spectacular circumstances of inspiration.

From what was said regarding Rilke's language, it will be clear that a full understanding and enjoyment of his poetry can be gained by those only who are able to read him in the original German. Yet for those unable to do so, who nevertheless wish to gather at least an idea of the greatness of this poetry, there are some excellent, though by no means flawless, translations available, notably that of the *Duino Elegies* by J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender; it contains the German text opposite the translation (Hogarth Press, 1939); also the following: *Sonnets to Orpheus*, translated by Leishman (with German text), 1936; *Selected Poems*, 1941, and *Later Poems*, 1938, by the same translator (all Hogarth Press). *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigg*, translated by John Linton, 1930 (Hogarth Press). *Selected Letters*, translated by R. C. F. Hull, 1946 (Macmillan). J. B. Leishman's introductions and commentaries in the above mentioned translations are a great help to any student of Rilke's poetry. The best biography in English is *Rilke, Man and Poet*, by Nora Wydenbruck, 1949 (John Lehmann).

H. W. BELMORE.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN BRITISH MUSIC

"Nobody wants the young British composer; he is unappreciated at home and unknown abroad. And, indeed, the composer who is not wanted in England can hardly desire to be known abroad, for though his appeal should be in the long run universal, art, like charity, should begin at home. If it is to be of any value, it must grow out of the very life of himself, the community in which he lives, the nation to which he belongs." These words, written by Vaughan Williams forty-three years ago, were a reflection on the condition of British music at that time, a reflection on its status, its aims and its hopes. Has the scene changed since then? Have we, the music public, taken British music to our hearts?

Before trying to answer these and other questions, I must first outline the scope of the subject and define certain limitations which impose themselves. I shall attempt to trace the development of British music from its infancy, for surely one of the main uses of history is as a basis for critical review of the present? Furthermore if British music is to be placed in its proper perspective, a comparison with foreign music is essential. If my approach is cautious it is because the limits of logical and fair criticism in music cause grave doubts in my mind as to the value of such criticism. There is no absolute standard by which to judge. Music cannot be defined in cold, exact terms, although we can get somewhere near the truth if we say it is a medium for the expression and transmission of thoughts; the most subtle, most sensitive and purest means of self-expression. Yet it is a very personal medium and is therefore to be treated with every respect. We have to admit that it is not an ideal medium. Once the composer has attempted to express his thoughts and feelings through notes on a stave he is at the mercy of his fellow men. Who are we to judge the source of his inspiration? We may criticise his use of the medium, his musical technique, but we can go no further. We in England are too fond of looking on music as a matter for detached appreciation. As Vaughan Williams has so discerningly observed, "The English amateur believes that there are only two kinds of music—good and bad—and if he can afford it, he prefers to import, together with the best brands of cigars and champagne, the best brands of music also. The connection between music and everyday life is entirely severed. The English composer is not, and for many generations will not be anything like so good as the great masters, but is he then of no value to

the community? Is it not possible that he has something to say to his own countrymen that no one of any other age and any other country can say? We must realise this—the English composer is our own voice, speaking through his art those things which we can only dimly grope for.”

It is often said that the English are not musical, that they have no musical heritage, no established musical tradition. When one thinks of the long period of creative decadence in music in this country, a period which only ended towards the end of the nineteenth century, one has to admit to a measure of agreement. The English way of life is steeped in tradition, at times almost stifled by it, yet we can boast of no long established tradition in music. But we have a musical heritage of which we may be proud. Music is in its origin a folk-art. The symphony was in the making in the hands of simple peasant people and before ever sonata form was thought of, its formal principles were ready and cast into a formula by the unconscious artistry of the folk singer. The quantity of British folk-song still preserved is enormous and it is of infinite variety. There are tender lyrics and long-winded narrative ballads, rhythmic labour songs, sea shanties, hunting songs, drinking songs, poacher songs, Christmas carols and wassails and even children's singing games. Then there are the dances—Morris dances and Sword dances, the Helston “Furry” dance, the Castleton Garland dance and many others—most of them dramatic in their significance and pagan in origin. It is the character of these folk tunes that we so often find reflected in the art-music of the British composer, and it is in the countryside that we must look for the origin of the now characteristic nature of British composition. National character is to be found in both the art-music and folk-music of our isles.

Folk-music is almost entirely melodic and early attempts at harmonisation were extremely crude, as might be expected. Experiments began to be made round about the ninth century but the ordinary peasants could never get very far. Thus it was that the Church tackled the problem and by the thirteenth century part-writing and harmonisation had begun to develop, though these early efforts might still be considered crude. To this there is one notable exception, John of Fornsete's *Sumer is icumen in*. John was a monk and keeper of the Charters at Reading Abbey and no doubt composed many part-songs for his fellow-monks. This particular work he recorded on paper and the manuscript is now preserved in the British Museum. In grace, beauty

and ingenuity of construction it far surpasses anything written in the following two and a half centuries. It is in six parts and contains musical forms which centuries later were established and used by Purcell and J. S. Bach. Furthermore, it is written, not in one of the modes then current, but in the modern key of F major, with the B flat duly marked at the beginning of every stave. It is no exaggeration to compare John of Fornsete with Leonardo da Vinci—both of whom foresaw with amazing clarity fundamental principles (in differing realms) which were to be realised centuries later as practical devices. And John of Fornsete was an Englishman! No musician in this country should ever forget such an heritage.

The English have always had a special interest in choral music and in the sixteenth century the English composer gave his attention largely to the requirements of the Church, notably Tye, Whyte and Tallis in the earlier half of the century and Byrd, Morley and Gibbons in the later half. These latter composers also produced considerable instrumental music. The advent of Puritan rule towards the end of this period had a devastating effect on church music and for a while all music produced was of a secular nature. With the return of the King, however, church music flourished again and Henry Purcell appeared on the scene, considered by many to be the greatest English composer of all time. Church, Court and Stage were the three great influences in Purcell's artistic life. He was organist of Westminster Abbey for a time and during this period he produced an enormous amount of church music. His connections with the Court were, from a musical viewpoint, perhaps a trifle unfortunate for he felt obliged to celebrate almost every movement of the Sovereign, often setting the most trivial words to music. This was surely a waste of time in a life that lasted only thirty-seven years. It is through his connections with the theatre that Purcell is best known to us today. Even so, only his two operas *Dido and Aeneas* and *The Fairy Queen* are known to more than a few. Several suites have been arranged, in order that his music may become independent of the plays for which it was written. It seems almost sacrilege to say that Purcell's chief claim to fame with the general musical public is as the composer of a theme used by Benjamin Britten in his *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*!

With the passing of Purcell there came a slump in British

composition. This has been attributed to various causes by musical historians. Dr. Ernest Walker lays the blame on Handel, who came to England fifteen years after Purcell's death and proceeded to dominate its musical life by producing a succession of oratorios, many of them second-rate, which captured the imagination of the musical public and discouraged any would-be originality in the young composers. Others have blamed the over-centralisation of musical life in London and the increasing exploration of the outside world by British adventurers. On reflection it does not seem really necessary that we should find a reason for the decline. The truth is surely that artistic genius is born, not made. The musical stage was held by Bach, Mozart, Schubert and Beethoven just as British composition had held it with Byrd, Tallis and Gibbons.

The foundations of the recovery were built by men like Stanford, Parry, McKenzie and Elgar. They established a school of British music which has become one of the dominating influences in the musical world today. Sir Edward Elgar stands head and shoulders above his contemporaries for he is the first English composer since Purcell to win national appreciation. Perhaps the most remarkable and certainly the most significant point about Elgar is that he was almost entirely self-taught. He had a few violin lessons, it is true, but his knowledge of harmony and counterpoint was acquired entirely through his own reading and study. His orchestration, which has never been bettered, developed as a result of the practice he had in arranging compositions for a small orchestra which he conducted in his youth. This orchestra was not equipped to tackle the full orchestral scores and so Elgar virtually re-orchestrated these works to suit his resources. For this reason the study of an Elgar score, so full and complex, reveals every note as an integral part of the structure. Vaughan Williams in attempting to arrange some of Elgar's works for smaller orchestras has observed that even in the accompaniments to choral movements there was hardly anything that could be left out without leaving a "hole" in the texture.

Elgar found great amusement in discovering that what was correct to one musical theorist was quite wrong to another. Accordingly he experimented for himself, and throughout his works we find his own little tricks and personal idioms. It is this which makes his music so individual. As with Berlioz and Sibelius, Elgar is nearly always either strongly disliked or ardently

admired, because of his individuality. This is especially so on the continent. Not for nothing has the term "Elgarian" been coined! Elgar is the shining example of a great composer who achieved a striking originality by curiously unoriginal means.

Elgar's powers of orchestration have been referred to earlier. His treatment of the inside parts is a revelation and he succeeds in holding the interest of the orchestra in consequence. For centuries violas and second violins had been condemned to filling up the harmony with the same notes repeated bar after bar. Just look at the score of a Haydn or Mozart symphony. Elgar has given these "Cinderellas" of the orchestra a new responsibility and sense of pride, and his example has been followed by modern composers. As with Sibelius, his early training as a violinist did not produce a virtuoso, but it taught him much about the art of writing for strings. In his *Introduction and Allegro* for string quartet and string orchestra we have the perfect model for string writing. In emotional content and in technical mastery it displays to the full the resources of a large string ensemble and amply shows how these two factors, technical and spiritual, released his characteristic musical personality. In all his music a waywardness of mood is discernible, yet there is no other composer so capable of coming straight to the point, if he feels like it.

There can then be no doubt as to Elgar's skill. His orchestration has never been excelled and his music is among the best from the point of view of the performer. Can one imagine a more delightful and varied work than the "*Enigma*" *Variations*. Yet these characteristics are not enough to explain his popularity in this country. One does not have to look for further explanation. Elgar's music has character and it is the character of an Englishman. National pride and patriotism surge through his music. His melodies have the broad sweeping outlines of his native Malvern Hills and there is a wonderful spaciousness and ease about his writing. Elgar, one feels, was a man at peace with the world. His thoughts are on a spiritual plane but through his music he succeeds in bringing them down to earth. Always one is conscious of a deep religious conviction, a humility before God and the devotion of a good Catholic. This inspiration culminated in *The Dream of Gerontius*.

Elgar was a product of the Victorian and Edwardian eras and his music reflects the nature of these periods, as indeed it must. This has at times been held against him, for some critics have

found the same faults in his compositions that they allege existed in the English way of life at that time. It is perhaps unfortunate that the Edwardian era was on its way out when Elgar was in his prime. Is it significant that apart from the violoncello concerto his last major work, the symphonic study *Falstaff*, was written in 1913, twenty-one years before the composer's death? There are sketches of a third symphony, but apart from this only comparatively minor works were produced. It is, however, more plausible to attribute this to the death of his wife in 1920, which was a shattering blow.

Musical analysts and detectives have been able to discover the influence of many other composers on Elgar. Prominent among these so-called influences are Wagner and Brahms. There is perhaps some slight dependence on Wagner, but any similarity to Brahms is difficult to find. There is a similarity in the bold, uncompromising approach, but at this point they diverge. There is no doubt about the uniqueness of Elgar, yet he managed it without turning the musical world upside-down or inside-out. Complete international fame is not yet his, but if his music is not always admired it will always be respected.

If Elgar may be said to have founded the modern school of British music, then Vaughan Williams has certainly established it. Yet there is a world of difference between the two men, even though each feels for the same ideals. Vaughan Williams grows in stature as the years roll on. Who dare say that he has written his last symphony even though he has passed the age of eighty?

Vaughan Williams was thirty-five years of age before he attracted any attention. The production of his *Sea Symphony* awoke men to the fact that a new voice had appeared in English music. The years since then have been a long process of development, a successive and successful search after musical truth. It has taken us some time to accept Vaughan Williams, for he concedes nothing to the listener. But once we can get beneath the surface of his music we find him warm and friendly and always in good humour. Vaughan Williams spent much of his time with Gustav Holst, but whereas the latter's thoughts seem to belong to another world (even though he makes them fully comprehensible to us), Vaughan Williams makes us feel at home. His continual inspiration is the English countryside, and in his obstinacy and flexibility he so well reflects our national character.

Vaughan Williams is concerned with past, present and future in his music. He has reverted to the very earliest musical styles with strings of consecutive fourths and fifths, such as characterise his great Mass in G minor. In works like the fourth symphony, the E minor symphony and the *Sinfonia Antartica* he looks to the future, sometimes with forebodings and at other times with a ray of hope and optimism. But more often he is content to reflect peacefully on the present. The *Fantasia* on a theme of Thomas Tallis and the *Pastoral Symphony* come to mind here. I am not ignorant of the fact that these works were written several decades ago. They seem to reflect on something which has withstood the passage of time and will continue to do so.

Vaughan Williams has been subjected to many potential influences, for he studied under Parry, Stanford, Bruch and Ravel. In addition he was a contemporary of Elgar. Yet no direct influence from these teachers can be found. He appears to have been far more dependent on the Elizabethan composers and on folk tunes, which he continually uses with great contrapuntal skill, and makes no apology for so doing. At the present time, when he is surrounded by "modernism," Vaughan Williams still pursues his own calm philosophic way, a way which is summed up beautifully in his fifth symphony. The sixth symphony is, as Hubert Foss points out, but an extension both in idiom and symphonic method. The fifth symphony was originally dedicated "without permission and with the sincerest flattery to Jean Sibelius, whose great example is worthy of imitation." There seems, however, to be little evidence of Sibelian influence in this work of Vaughan Williams or in any other. Both have evolved an individual symphonic manner, but they have gone in quite opposite directions. Sibelius becomes progressively less contrapuntal, whereas the symphonies of Vaughan Williams are increasingly polyphonic in texture. Vaughan Williams' style has always been very personal and it becomes more and more so.

If the music of Vaughan Williams is regarded against the background of English life and literature, influences can perhaps be found. Hubert Foss, in an admirable biography, sees the influence of John Bunyan as being particularly significant. In discussing this aspect of the composer Foss writes: "Direct evidence of unusually close attachment to *The Pilgrim's Progress* was given in the 'pastoral episode' of 1922; a kind of associative musical style was created that is the core to Vaughan Williams' expressive

mind. Looking backward from that date we can see the Bunyan association in the Tallis *Fantasia*, forward in works as diverse as *Sancta Civitas*, *Job* and this (the fifth) symphony." This is indeed an interesting observation and comparisons of this kind could be made almost indefinitely.

How completely this exposes the folly of dividing art into little water-tight compartments, as we are so apt to do!

To attempt to dissect the music of Vaughan Williams as a medical student might cut up a dogfish would be a complicated and useless process. Throughout his music there is an essential unity and very little that is either "impressionistic" or "programme." He has been much criticised—but how well he has survived! The truth is that he is as yet but little understood. Quoting again from Hubert Foss: "Perhaps few of us are old enough to understand the E minor symphony, perhaps some too old. Perhaps it is for our children or our children's children—if they will listen to it. Perhaps even I shall grow to a proper stature to comprehend its entirety." How well one might apply these words to the whole of Vaughan Williams' music. Will we ever be able to "comprehend its entirety"?

Apart from Vaughan Williams the first generation of composers after Elgar included such men as Granville Bantock and Frederick Delius. The most important contributions of Bantock are his choral works, and much of his inspiration can be traced to English folk-lore and Eastern sources. He was most attracted to the nineteenth century programme music and the influence of Wagner, Strauss and the Russians is quite marked.

Delius was born in this country but spent most of his life in France, where he composed and eventually died in total isolation. Despite this, much of his music is reflective of English country life although, unlike Vaughan Williams, his impressions are often vague, and his musical directions even more so. It has been said that unless Beecham edits all Delius there is a danger of his music dying. This may indeed be true, for so much of Delius can only be read by intuition.

Arnold Bax has occupied an important position in English music, bridging the gap between romanticism and modernism. He has strong programmatic tendencies which relate him to the older school, but these tendencies are at times tinged by

impressionism. Nevertheless his music bears the stamp of authority and shows a thorough understanding of the modern orchestra. It is at the present time rather sadly neglected.

The same cannot be said of John Ireland, who enjoys increasing popularity in this country. This is no doubt due in part to his romanticism and a rather compromising, though bold, approach. Much of his music shows the influence of Debussy, Ravel and, at times, even Delius. Ireland is no revolutionary but he is, in his later works especially, quite individual.

So we come to the present time with the older generation represented by men like William Walton and Arthur Bliss and the younger generation by Benjamin Britten, Lennox Berkeley, Alan Rawsthorne and Michael Tippett. It is not unfair to say that modern music is accepted only with considerable reserve. Yet we in Britain have a school of modernists for which we should be grateful. We must accept the inevitable development in style and a certain amount of experiment. Through the present generation English music has entirely emancipated itself and has achieved a character of its own. The young English musicians seek contact with folk music and the Elizabethan composers but they use modern methods. A study of the music of the Viennese School led by Schoenberg and Alban Berg will convince anyone that we have much for which to be thankful. Their's is a sea of perplexity with the most ridiculous extremes and hair-splitting.

One of the fundamental differences between the composers of the British school and those of the Continental schools is that the latter have tended to band together for their mutual defence or attack, whereas the British composer has retained his individuality. A particularly interesting development in recent years is the amount of operatic music which is being produced. Few British composers have ever seriously concerned themselves with opera. Now, however, Benjamin Britten in particular has devoted himself to vocal music and to operatic music.

The immediate appeal of modern music depends on how much the composers concede to the listener. To people saturated with the Classics and the more seductive music of the Romantics, modern British music is not easy to listen to or understand. It demands patience and tolerance—not the most prominent of virtues. But much of it is exciting and stimulating, and above all

it is truly British. We have at last broken away from German influence and established a national tradition of our own. At the same time we must appreciate the individuality of the British composer. Feeling for music and musical creation are individual, not national, characteristics.

We have traced the development of British music from its very foundations, our national folk music. We have followed the early progress in counterpoint and harmonisation which led up to the first Elizabethan era, the Golden Age of British composition. We have seen the decline and then the Renaissance of British music. So now, what of the future? We can do no better than take notice once more of the words of Vaughan Williams, the head of all our British music.

"Art for art's sake has never flourished in England. We are often called inartistic because our art is unconscious. Our drama and poetry, like our laws and constitution, have evolved by accident while we thought we were doing something else, and so it will be with music. The composer must not shut himself up and think about art, he must live with his fellows and make his art an expression of the whole life of the community—if we seek for art we shall not find it.

"Perhaps the future has another Bach in store for us and perhaps he will be an Englishman, but if that is to be so we must prepare the way for him."

ALAN CARRINGTON.

"ST. MATTHEW PASSION"

Stillness rules my heart, Deep within I feel the waves of Peace
Touching the shores of my being,
I move at rest, a dream-born thing,
Deep in Eternity's hemless seas.

With Bach praising I am resurrected,
Wondering Lazarus from his darkened cave
Of unknowing, felt no greater joy
Than mine for stillness rules my heart,
And deep within I feel the waves of Peace.

M. E. LUSCOMBE.

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